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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Contorted Costs

Just before winging off on his European tour, President Reagan pledged that the U.S. would not "undercut" any of the "existing strategic arms agreements." This is typical arms control rhetoric, calculated to mean a great deal at first blush and very little after careful reading. But if the President actually meant that the U.S. would abide by the terms of SALT-I and SALT-II, he has just ruled out the MX missile option most favored by his national security advisers.

The administration is under instructions from Congress to make up its mind on how to base the MX missile so it would survive a first strike by large and increasingly accurate Soviet missiles. The Carter administration's solution was to make the missiles mobile so the Soviets wouldn't know where to aim, but confine them in gigantic racetracks so they could be counted by spy satellities verifying an arms agreement. This would have resulted in the largest construction project in history, gobbling up immense amounts of Western land and water

Whither Arms Control? — IV
An Editorial Series

and almost certainly pricing itself out of existence. The Reagan planners quickly junked this Rube Goldberg scheme, but Congress refused to fund the missile without a basing solution.

Currently the administration is leaning toward "dense pack"—basing the missiles in silos so hard a direct hit would be needed to destroy each one, but so close together a hit on one would ruin the accuracy of an incoming missile attacking the next one. This would be relatively simple and cheap, and would be a plausible way of creating so many uncertainties a Soviet planner could never launch a confident attack.

Dense pack would require the construction of new missile silos, though, since existing ones are not close enough together. New silos are not allowed under either the expired SALT-I offensive agreement or the unratified SALT-II. Our negotiators provided for the racetrack, or at least claimed they did, but not other designs. Missiles in dense pack would be no more threatening to the Russians than the same missiles in racetracks, and a survivable land-based force would make a first strike less inviting to the Soviets and make deterrence more stable. Yet Mr. Reagan may now find himself forced to forgo the dense pack option, and be left with no viable MX basing solution, merely because he pledged to abide by a treaty that provides for basing the missile only in a Rube Goldberg way.

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fensive arms would make it unnecessary; the huge increase in throwweight with the Soviets' new SS-19 and SS-16 missiles undercut this bargain. But if there had never been a SALT or a START, Sen. Exon never would have heard of megatonnage, and the Titan II would long since have been retired. Megatonnage that can't hit anything doesn't mean much militarily; it serves only to make the SALT negotiators' comparison charts look better. The Titan remains in service less for the mission of deterrence than the mission of selling SALT.

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You have never heard of the Porcupine or Swarmjet weapons systems. These are systems that would defend missile sites with non-nuclear projectiles. Porcupine would shoot a shotgun-blast of metal lumps into the path of an incoming missile. Swarmjet would do the same thing, except each projectile would have a rocket booster.

These systems would be a cheap way to introduce uncertainty into any attack on land-based missiles. They would threaten no one. They would only be fired in case of an incoming missile, and even then could hurt a Russian only if he were walking in a Montana wheat field. But these systems never even make it to the top of the Pentagon bureaucracy. They raise too many questions about compliance with arms control. Among other things, in SALT-I we agreed not to deploy anti-missile systems with multiple warheads.

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The much-publicized deployment of cruise missiles in Europe has a small hitch—the basing mode is as silly as the MX racetrack. The ground-launched cruise missiles would be deployed in a 22-vehicle convoy, presumably racing down the *Autobahn* with red lights flashing if deployed in any emergency. The same missiles, only 20 feet long, could be deployed on helicopters or short takeoff and landing aircraft. But under SALT-II, such aircraft would probably be counted as "heavy bombers," and could be deployed only if B-52s were junked.

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The most serious impact of arms agreements on our defense posture is the subtle effect on the evolution of the super-accurate cruise missile. Precision-guided munitions will dominate the military future—not only nuclear but conventional, as the Falkland Islands fighting so clearly showed. The U.S. has an advantage in these technologies, and as stopping the ABM was the Soviet objective in SALT-I, hampering cruise missile development is the Soviet objective in SALT-

Since the end of World War II, the only people killed by U.S. strategic missile systems have been David Livingston, Robert A. Thomas and Erby Hepstall. Sgt. Livingston, Staff Sgt. Thomas and Airman Hepstall were victims of accidents at Titan II missile sites. The 54 Titans have been struck by a series of accidents, often involving the missile's volatile and noxious liquid fuels. The two most serious accidents have involved 58 injuries as well as the three fatalities.

The Titan II, first deployed in 1962, is the only liquid-fueled rocket left in the U.S. inventory. By modern standards, it is not accurate enough to hit anything, but it has a very large warhead—some nine megatons, or 1,000 times the size of the Hiroshima bomb. The military purpose of a large but inaccurate weapon is at best equivocal; U.S. retaliatory doctrine does not include deliberate targeting of Russian civilians. Anyway, since Titan silos are old and relatively soft, they are most unlikely to survive a Soviet first strike.

An Air Force panel investigated the accidents and declared the system safe enough for continued use. (In the 1980 accident near Damascus, Ark., a wrench socket fell 70 feet into the silo and punctured the missile's ⅛-inch skin, releasing fuel fumes that eventually exploded and hurled the warhead into a nearby field.) Defense Secretary Robert McNamara wanted to retire the Titan shortly after it was deployed. Earlier this year the Reagan administration proposed to retire them at the rate of one per month, but the proposal was rejected by the Congress.

"Why in the world, Mr. President, on the very eve of the initiation of the START negotiations, would we dismantle one-third, or nearly one-third of our land-based ICBM megatonnage?" demanded Sen. James Exon during the floor debate. "What did we get in return from the Soviets? We got nothing. We got nothing, that is what we got in return. This is pure and simple unilateral disarmament."

Megatonnage, or more precisely throwweight, is indeed important in trying to design an arms control treaty. In SALT-I we agreed to forgo an ABM system to defend missile sites in the hopes that limits on Soviet of-

The SALT-II treaty would limit "heavy bombers," including all aircraft with cruise missiles of over 600 kilometers in range. The protocol to the treaty would apply the 600 kilometer limit to all sea-launched cruise missiles. It will be interesting to learn whether the protocol qualifies as "an existing strategic arms agreement." Even if it had been ratified it would have expired by now—but then, SALT-I offensive limitations have also expired. Adherence to the protocol would force the Pentagon to forgo already announced plans to deploy long-range cruise missiles at sea.

In any event, the protocol has already impeded cruise missile development; the Carter administration explicitly slowed funding because of the possibility that the protocol limits would be extended. And in any future arms agreement, the cruise missile poses huge problems—it is small, mobile, easily concealed and may have nuclear or conventional warheads. The most likely outcome of concerns over "verification" would be to consider all cruise missiles as nuclear. The ironic result would be to allow nuclear cruise missiles but prohibit conventionally armed ones. In the name of a safer world, arms control would stop the one weapon most likely to make nuclear warheads unnecessary.

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The effort to reach arms agreements with the Soviets carries real costs. In particular, it produces incredible contortions in our weapons deployments, hampering cheap and effective solutions and leaving us with expensive and often foolish ones. Often it forces us toward more threatening weapons rather than less threatening ones; indeed this perversity is too pronounced to be merely happenstance. The more we ponder the irony, the more persuaded we become that its roots lie in a basic misconception about technology. Since the first atomic explosion, the automatic assumption has been that the thrust of technology is toward more dangerous weapons. But in fact, in the current stage the thrust of technology seems to be generally toward less dangerous ones. In trying to freeze development in the name of "ending the arms race," arms agreements risk leaving the world not a safer place but a riskier one.